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## **Technology Applications to Enhance the Interpreter Referral Process and Address Changes in the Industry**

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**Cindy Walsh, B.S.**

### **Abstract**

With the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, sign language interpreter demands have dramatically increased and non-profit agencies for the Deaf have been inundated with requests for interpreting services. Paper and pencil systems to track interpreter requests, bill for services, and pay the interpreters have quickly become ineffective for handling large volumes of interpreter requests. As Eighinger (1999) asserts, "It is ... incumbent upon agencies in order to maintain a competitive advantage to invest in technology." Valley Center of the Deaf (VCD) and Community Outreach Program for the Deaf (COPD) have developed customized software to handle the needs of their interpreter referral programs.

### **Introduction**

Valley Center of the Deaf (VCD) and Community Outreach Program for the Deaf (COPD) have been coordinating interpreter requests for over 25 years in Tucson and southern Arizona, almost 20 years in the Phoenix metropolitan area and northern Arizona, and for over a year in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and rural New Mexico. With many years experience providing interpreter referral service, the agencies have had the unique opportunity to observe the development of an industry through a dynamic time in history. Not so long ago, sign language interpreting and communication access for the deaf, deaf-blind, and hard-of-hearing were either volunteer services or grant subsidized programs limited by the funding available. Interpreters developed a professional organization and code of ethics to increase and promote professionalism among its members, but the cost to businesses and governmental entities of providing interpreters was prohibitive, and the interpreters' efforts to advance the profession were hampered by businesses' reluctance to hire them. Significant advances both in federal legislation and in technology in the past ten years have made drastic changes in the field of interpreting.

With the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, most businesses and organizations which provide a service to the public are now required to provide access to "effective communication" (Department of Justice, 1991) as an accommodation for deaf, deaf-blind, and hard-of-hearing consumers of their services. Tucker (1994) explains, "Interpreters must be provided for hearing-impaired clients or customers whenever that

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is necessary for effective communication.” With this federal mandate in place, the demand for interpreting services has multiplied rapidly.

According to Burch (2000), National Association of the Deaf (NAD) and the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) jointly declared a national crisis in the quality, quantity, and qualifications of interpreters in 1994. This interpreter shortage has left non-profit, community service based organizations struggling to keep up.

Non profit organizations, which typically cannot afford the most current technology nor sophisticated computers, in the past could handle interpreter referral programs through paper and pencil, or older computer technology. Volume of requests was limited by available funding, and managing services with limited staff and antiquated technology was feasible.

Fifteen years ago, COPD and VCD each managed a small referral service. Each agency was staffed with a department director and interpreter coordinator, one or two staff interpreters, and a pool of freelance interpreters. The interpreting departments’ primary functions were to maintain relationships with the deaf community and with local interpreters and to schedule interpreters to meet deaf community requests. The relationship with businesses or hearing consumers was a minimal part of the overall operation. Frequently the business or hearing consumer would have no involvement with or knowledge of the interpreting request until an interpreter arrived with the deaf consumer. Formal service agreements or contracts with business were the exception rather than the norm. Billing and collection of payment for services was a small task (because few businesses paid for the service) and was handled by the organization’s business office. Payment to interpreters was also a small task handled by the business office, because the manageable volume of interpreting jobs and the small pool of interpreters resulted in processing a few requests for checks in each accounts payable cycle.

Within the past five years COPD and VCD have seen a dramatic change in both volume of interpreting requests and the resulting changes in the primary functions and relationships of the interpreting departments. While the Tucson agency has been able to grow at a comfortable pace, the New Mexico agency grew from non-existence to a near capacity operation with its start up staff within the first few months of its inception. The Phoenix agency, working in one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the U.S., has tripled in capacity in a few year time span and has required continuous modification to manage the volume of requests. The two person department in Phoenix has expanded to now include five office staff to handle all requests for services, manage all formal business relationships,

schedule interpreters, and handle all billing, accounts receivables, collections, and interpreter pay issues. In addition, this office maintains eight full time staff interpreters, as well as a pool of freelance interpreters.

### Using Computer Software

With a larger volume of interpreting requests, VCD and COPD have found the scheduling functions of computer software helpful in managing the details of the requests and in assigning interpreters. Because the software is on a network and allows multiple users to work with the data at the same time, as soon as a request is entered in the computer, the assignment information is available for other users who are permitted access to the database. The interpreter referral software is linked to a paging program so that interpreters can be paged through the software via modem. At the time a request is entered a preferred interpreter can be recorded, and with a click of the mouse the referral staff can send an alpha numeric page informing the interpreter that s/he has been requested for a specific date and time. The software also features a spreadsheet which displays all non-cancelled jobs for a given date in order of the interpreters assigned to them, with unassigned jobs prominent at the top of the spreadsheet. The scheduler can utilize this visual display of the work to assist in scheduling unassigned work. If the scheduler focuses on a specific job it will filter out all interpreters who are unavailable due to a time conflict from another job, or according to pre-determined time blocks of unavailability reported by the interpreter. The scheduler also can make use of a feature that displays only unassigned jobs, in date order.

Interpreting services in educational settings create special challenges for referral agencies. Generally a college semester schedule must be coordinated once to cover several months of service and is adjusted periodically if students drop or add classes. This software includes a mass scheduling module which tracks students schedules and their interpreter preferences, interpreter class preferences and availability, and information about the entities paying for the services. The academic module takes all the variables involved in scheduling the semester, allows the user to assign interpreters for each class or opt for the computer to assign them, and then generates a record for each occurrence of each student's classes. These academic assignments display with all other assignments in the system, so in the case that an interpreter calls in sick for a particular day, the scheduler can locate a replacement for that day by reviewing the daily spreadsheet. By creating records for each occurrence of the class, the referral staff can pay interpreters and bill funding sources precisely on a class by class basis. The academic module also recognizes team interpreted classes and when

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multiple students attend the same class. It will calculate split billing for students who share an interpreter and it will efficiently assign only one interpreter per class (unless a team is specified), even when multiple students attend a class.

The three agencies in Arizona and New Mexico have found that they have three “customer groups” which must be served: businesses/hearing consumers, deaf consumers, and interpreters. Despite the regional differences between the agencies they have found common issues related to these three customer groups, and techniques and technologies to work with them and manage the resulting business.

### **Businesses as Clients**

Non-profit community based organizations and interpreter referral services have traditionally viewed the deaf consumer as their primary “client” and “customer.” But with the mandate (in the ADA) to businesses and governmental agencies to provide equal communication access to deaf individuals, community based organizations and interpreting referral services must expand and/or develop relationships with businesses and hearing consumers. The business or agency is no longer just the location of the interpreting assignment but is now paying for the service, and therefore a customer of the interpreting service. As new customers, most businesses are still not aware of the laws and need to be educated and to form alliances with professional service providers. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges experienced service providers have faced has been the philosophical change in mind set regarding the business or hearing consumer. Years of working to advocate for the deaf may have trained us to view the business or hearing consumer as the adversary or the oppressor. Now our duty is not only to provide them with education about communication accessibility issues, but also to approach them with a customer service perspective and view them as valued customers and partners in providing the services that fulfill our mission statements. Although community education becomes a primary function for interpreting department staff, they must balance advocacy with marketing services. Our approach with businesses to inform them of their legal obligation must be professional and handled with great caution. We need to be perceived as one option for the business to consider in meeting their legal obligation to provide access, not as self seeking opportunists whose primary goal is to increase our revenue at the expense of the businesses with which our deaf consumers wish to have access.

Part of the expanded relationship with the business community requires the increase in use of formal service agreements and contracts. Interpreting referral services must function more like small businesses; this

is another change in mind set for traditional, non-profit, community based direct service providers. Formal, written agreements for payment are crucial. They ensure that the businesses have agreed in writing to pay for the services, and this helps to protect agencies from significant financial loss or bad debt incurred as a result of businesses failure to pay for services rendered. To deal with the changes in the law, the market, and the three customer groups, COPD and VCD developed software as a valuable tool to track which businesses had asked for information about interpreting, what information had been provided, and whether or not the business signed a service agreement. The software also links with fax software so that agency specific and ADA information, as well as a service agreement, can be faxed directly from the interpreting department staff to the business at the time of the business' initial call for information. In addition, the software flags interpreting jobs in which the requester has no signed service agreement, so that the interpreter scheduler can follow up with the business before an interpreter is sent.

Interpreting services do not fit well into the existing systems of many large businesses or governmental entities. Behavioral health systems are unaccustomed to contracting for services (like interpreting) which are specific to their members but which are not direct services, such as counseling. Hospitals and large health care organizations are accustomed to contracting for patient service providers whose services are health care in nature, such as nurses, therapists, technicians, etc. Interpreters do not fit in this mold. These large corporations generally purchase equipment or renovate facilities to meet accommodation needs. So providing an hourly service, such as interpreting, and calling it an accommodation rather than direct service just does not work easily into their large complex systems. This problem of interpreting services as an oddity to large systems creates more work for interpreter referral staff. They must constantly work with the businesses to assure them that the deaf service agency does not need to meet behavioral health provider licensing, and interpreters do not need to meet licensing standards for nurses and health care providers. Likewise, since interpreting is a communication access service and not a treatment, interpreter referral programs do not track or document personal information about the deaf consumer or the services they have received from these large systems. The absence of information about the nature of the service or treatment provided to the deaf consumer can impede the process of securing payment from the large systems for interpreting services provided.

Interpreter referral programs must educate large corporations that the legal requirement to provide communication access for deaf individuals is a language issue, like foreign spoken language interpreting, but cannot

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be managed like foreign spoken language translation, which is not an accommodation for a disability. Finally, the interpreter referral staff often struggles to secure payment for services rendered, because invoices for interpreting services are unlike the majority of invoices received by large accounts payable departments. A hospital, behavioral care facility, or other large business may use a large volume of interpreting services, but the invoice for services may end up sitting on a clerk's desk because it is out of the ordinary to their system.

### **Invoicing for Services**

With the increased demand for interpreting services and the mandate for businesses to pay for the services, billing and collections for interpreting services becomes a bigger issue for interpreter referral programs. While COPD and VCD historically passed these functions on to the organization's business office, the increased volume of requests and of payers necessitated that billing and collections be managed closer to the source. Referral department staff had working knowledge of the interpreting assignments, the hearing customers, and the information needed to generate workable invoices and to clarify billing questions in order to facilitate payment. In addition, software was an integral solution to tracking payments received, outstanding invoices, and companies which refuse to pay. The software links payment history with new requests for services, so that companies which are not current with payment are flagged and can be addressed before additional services are rendered.

Failure to pay requires advanced tracking capabilities and unfortunately results in consequences for deaf consumers. Coping with businesses which refuse to pay for interpreting services creates a great dilemma for non-profit, community based, mission minded agencies. The agency may have a strong mission statement supporting equal communication access for all deaf individuals and yet may need to deny services based upon a business' refusal to pay for interpreting services. Funding sources and grants to provide free interpreting services slowly dwindle away because interpreting is covered by the ADA, and the precious little funding available tends to be allocated for other services not mandated. Philosophically, is it fair to businesses (which meet their obligation to provide communication access) to pay for their interpreting services, while non-profit agencies subsidize the businesses which refuse to pay by sending interpreters to them without insisting on payment? Is it fair to deaf consumers to be denied services by a long time agency ally when a community business, medical specialist, or other entity does not want to provide them with communication access? These are tough

questions which have no black and white answers. Disability rights and legal advocates help tackle these difficult situations one case and one phone call at a time.

Obviously the change in the nature of the interpreter referral service's relationship with businesses and hearing consumers, and the change in how interpreting services are funded, have resulted in a change in the agency's relationship with deaf consumers. Originally the referral service acted like an appointment service for deaf individuals to call and request interpreters. Interpreter referral staff worked most closely with the deaf individual to provide interpreters. But as already described, interpreter referral staff now focus a significant amount of time on educating hearing consumers and establishing formal relationships with them. In many instances businesses which are paying for interpreting services may not permit the request for service to come directly from the deaf consumer to the referral service, as the business wants to pre-authorize appointments or meetings before interpreting services are rendered. In addition, the referral staff must also educate deaf consumers on how to advocate for interpreting services and ask deaf consumers to get involved with making the request for services from the payers. This may be imperative to forge a relationship directly between the deaf and hearing consumers, so that together they negotiate what the communication access needs are. As hearing consumers are asked directly by their deaf consumers/clients/patients for the accommodation, the businesses/service providers begin to understand that they are responsible to make the provision. Some deaf consumers are uncomfortable using this approach to having their communication access needs met. The deaf community has worked for years to promote a cultural versus disability perspective on deafness. Now the ADA, which they campaigned for, requires that businesses be approached from a disability model to enforce the legislation. Community based service organizations must continue to strive to meet the needs of deaf individuals who do not want to or cannot self-advocate, while working within the business environment created by the ADA.

### Effects on the Interpreters

Interpreters, the third consumer group, have also been affected by the increased demand for interpreting services. As the demand steadily rises, interpreter referral services must constantly recruit new interpreters. Community based organizations providing a variety of services for deaf consumers must switch from a social service to a business mentality in order to compete for interpreters.



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Quality of interpreting, or skill of the interpreters, has always been important to deaf consumers and to referral services. As more businesses are in the market to purchase interpreting services, non-profit, community based referral services must educate businesses on the value and necessity of using qualified interpreters. As referral services recruit interpreters and strive to hire interpreters with a standard of quality, the services may be competing for business with unqualified interpreters who are willing to sell their service at a lower cost. The business community, attempting to reduce costs, may not know how to assess qualifications in interpreters and may be unaware of the potential harm and liability of using unqualified “interpreters.”

Because the demand for qualified interpreters is high and the supply is inadequate, payment for qualified interpreters has to be more competitive. According to Burch (2000), the interpreter “... shortage will continue until pay issues have been resolved.” Contemporary pay scales, including night differentials, payment for specialty work, etc. make processing their pay a larger, more complicated task.

Increased volume requires more sophisticated means to track payment for interpreting assignments. Because the charge to the payer and the payment to the interpreter are both based upon the hours scheduled or actual hours worked, VCD and COPD use software features to calculate what to bill and what to pay on a job by job basis. The software considers a multitude of variables. For billing, variables include variations in rate billed according to contracts, evening or specialty premiums, basic billable units, and rules for cancellations and jobs which happened differently than scheduled. Payment criteria for interpreters include rates according to certification, specialty skills, differentials for evenings, and payment for cancellations.

Regional or state differences in how interpreters are paid create additional detail which may need to be tracked. Some states assess gross receipts taxes on self-employed contract interpreters, and paying this tax to the interpreter requires additional calculations and tracking for the referral service. In some circumstances, interpreters are reimbursed for mileage or travel expenses, which must also be tracked for payment and billing. VCD and COPD are able to capture and manage these details through software features.

## Conclusion

Interpreting services for deaf persons have changed significantly in recent times. Community based service organizations are forced to manage interpreting services more like businesses and less like service

programs. Entrepreneurs with for profit businesses create new competition for the non-profit organizations. Legislative mandates for businesses to provide interpreting services require new relationships between the non-profits and the business community. Deaf service organizations continue to strive to fulfill their missions while changes in the relationships between businesses and deaf service organizations have impacted the relationship between the service organization and deaf consumers. The rapid increase in demand for interpreting with the insufficient supply of qualified interpreters has challenged non-profits to compete for the services of available interpreters. Fortunately, as all of the environmental changes have taken place, technology has also changed and developed. Many of the challenges faced by non-profit, community based service organizations can be managed through automation and software. By handling the business functions smoothly and efficiently with computers, organizations can increase their productivity and can free up time to devote to quality service provision and meeting the needs of their consumers.

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